THE NUN IN GERMAN LITERATURE

BY

SISTER MARY GRETCHEN HESSLER, O.P.

A.B., University of Illinois, 1931
A.M., University of Illinois, 1941

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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THE NUN IN GERMAN LITERATURE

No study of the nun in German literature has been made, though Olga Reitschel wrote a dissertation in a closely related field, entitled *Der Mönch in der Dichtung des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1934). The present study, therefore, has attempted to discover the literature which deals with the nun and to present a picture of the shifting evaluation of the nun in literature. As one would expect, no one era is completely hostile nor entirely friendly, yet the pendulum swings far toward one or the other extreme among certain groups of writers. In each period man's attitude toward the nun has been influenced in large part by the prevailing philosophy, by political and social conditions, and by the dominant religious attitudes of his predecessors.

It was necessary to make a preliminary study of the history of monasticism as found in the Roman Catholic church, to survey the contributions of nuns to early literature, and to examine the material written about them. Particularly helpful in this study were Friedrich Pesendorffer's *Künstlerinnen und Schriftstellerinnen im Nonnenkleide* (Pressverein Linz, 1932), Lina Eckenstein's *Woman under Monasticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1896), Gustav Klemm's *Die Frauen im Mittelalter* (Dresden: Arnold, 1857), and Erk-Böhme's *Der deutsche Liederhort* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1893-94). The dissertation by Hans Helbron, *Das Lied vom Grafen und der Nonne,* was extremely valuable not only for the study of this particular ballad, but also for a survey of the ballad and lyric themes of later epochs.

In addition, the task demanded a search through a wide range of books in the hope of finding works that treated nuns. No previous bibliographies proved of any considerable assistance since they covered so small a portion of the field and from so different an angle. For English literature, there was a dissertation by Sister Mary of the Incarnation Byrne on *The Tradition of the Nun in the Literature of the Middle Ages* (Catholic University Dissertation, 1932), but the only work on German literature that might have been of special use was a typewritten dissertation, *Der Klosterroman* (München, 1932), by Heinz Strauss, that was not available.

More material has been written about the nun in eighteenth century literature than in any other period of time. Not only did Olga Rietschel's study prove of assistance but also Marianne Thalmann's *Der Trivialroman des 18. Jahrhunderts und der romantische Roman* (Berlin: Ebering, 1923) and Heinrich Kraeger's *Johann Martin Miller. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Empfindsamkeit* (Bremen: Heinsius, 1893) were especially valuable. For the literary periods since that time reference material was decidedly scarce and it was necessary to study each work individually.

The material is as complete as was possible under present war-time limitations. The vast expanse of material to be covered allowed no detailed concentration on one phase of the work. The greater portion of the rich collection of German fiction at the University of Illinois was examined. Of the fiction and non-fiction listed in the bibliography, not quite five hundred of the more than nine hundred volumes perused proved to be of assistance. Besides the standard German dramas studied, over three hundred recent German plays were surveyed. The material which this search yielded in regard to the shifting evaluation of the attitude toward nuns is here presented as summaries of consecutive periods.

I. *The Nun in the Literature of the Middle Ages*

Monasticism did not spring up with Christianity, but gradually developed and became a Christian organization that played a vital role in the spiritual, intellectual, and material life of Europe from the sixth century onwards. In its very earliest manifestations as exemplified in the anchoresses and beguines, German women played a predominant role as religious examplars and teachers. From abbesses, nuns, and convent pupils came the first literary leaders among German women.

The first nuns to come to Germany were the missionaries, Walburga (d. 710) and Lioba (d. 779), who volunteered to leave their Anglo-Saxon home and follow St. Boniface to his new field of religious teaching. Eventually native German women of fine families became nuns and abbesses in the ever-increasing convents of the land. They became prominent figures in their districts, taking active part in religious, political, and social activi-

ties as esteemed and influential advisers. These abbesses include in their ranks many of the canonized saints of the church as well as daughters of royalty. In great part they shaped the educational standards of their day in that their curriculum of Bible history, music, and fancy work became the accepted standard. In rare cases nuns taught their pupils Roman literature, rhetoric, logic, and popular science.

Many of their early writings have been lost. In great part such works were prompted by their religious zeal. Letters, prayers, biographical works, and encyclopedias attest to their thirst for knowledge both in the spiritual and material field. Among those nuns most endowed with literary talents must be mentioned Roswitha von Gandersheim (932-1002?) who in the tenth century wrote metrical legends, didactic poems, and six forceful religious plays. Unfortunately her works dropped out of sight and were not known until rediscovered by Konrad Celtes in the sixteenth century. Their influence was, consequently, slight, yet they represent a surprising advance over any other extant dramas of the tenth century.

Of all the writings done by nuns, Germany was rich especially in mystical writings. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries one finds such outstanding women mystics as Hildegard von Bingen, Elisabeth von Schönau, and Mechtilde von Magdeburg. They wrote religious tracts and autobiographical accounts of their progress in sanctity and in the mystical union of their souls with God. Gertrud and Mechtilde von Hackeborn were likewise gifted with literary talent. Other mystical writings were left by Margarete and Christine Ebner who were guided in their mystical experiences by Heinrich von Nördlingen.

If one surveys the literature written about nuns, one must study the social functions of convents in the Middle Ages in order to interpret the writings. In feudal society convents served not only the noble purpose of providing a harbor for souls who wanted to live a more prayerful life, but they also served as a refuge for the undesirable, whether illegitimate, physically defective, widows, or political exiles. The convent was at once a dignified solution for bewildered unmarried women and a haven, similar to an inn, to which noblemen might entrust women

or children according to their whims. In both cases the nun was to a greater or lesser extent an unwilling victim.

Such an institution with its heterogeneous members could not avoid spiritual and material crises, yet it served its social purpose remarkably well. Besides being a haven for the unmarried, convents raised the standards of intellectual life for women of that day. There were, in addition, nuns who remained faithful to the life in the conviction that their souls would profit from such a dedication. It was this positive rather than the negative purpose of convents that St. Thomas Aquinas and his followers promoted. Thomistic philosophy recommends religious life as a refuge for young people that they may avoid the evils of the world. St. Thomas not only encourages former sinners to become nuns that they may reform, but praises those who induce others to live the life of a religious. In contradistinction to the many selfish motives which undoubtedly caused some parents to relinquish their daughters to a life-time of enforced piety, other parents undoubtedly urged their daughters to enter convents for the purpose of invoking purely spiritual blessings on their household.

Such women as did enter convents had to be of well-to-do families as a dowry was required. Between them and the folk there was a very definite class distinction. Except for three devotional folk poems composed by nuns (No. 2137a,b,c, in Erk-Böhme) nuns seem to have had a small part in the history of the *Volkslied*. Only when one turns to the folk songs about nuns does one find a rich storehouse of interesting material. Even among Latin writings of the period there is only one extant fragment of a nun song. This first song about a nun is the *Kleriker und Nonne song*, a predecessor of the *Nonnenklage*.

The nun plays a more important role in folk song than has been previously pointed out. The first abundant evidence of nuns as figures in literature appears with the *Nonnenklage* in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There are about twenty-five or thirty *Nonnenklagen* extant with many variants of each. In general they express the complaint of a fair young lady who has been placed in the convent by adamant parents. She longs for freedom to enjoy the spring, the birds, and her lover. Though this pattern of bemoaning "mîner jungen Tage" becomes highly

stereotyped, there are varying treatments of the complaint motif. Emphasis is laid at times on her bitterness against those who forced her into the convent, as in "Gott geb im ein verdorben jar", at other times on her spiritless resignation to a life-long deprivation of the pleasures she formerly enjoyed. "Ich ess nicht gerne Gerste" is a typical lament of the high-born girl forced to endure a simple and drab life.

The *Nonnenlieder* are songs quite in keeping with the melancholy tone so prevalent in folk literature. To arouse the pity of the listener, the author must place his lovely heroine in a lonely "prison" where the future seems more intolerable than death. To be bereft of love was life's harshest demand according to folk song tradition, which constantly repeats, "Ach hätt' ich mein Schätzchen in dem Arm". In every case the song develops the theme of such a victim's consequent loneliness without the solace of human love. In no case is religious devotion or spiritual love presented by the folk as compensating in the slightest degree for the sacrifice of earthly affection.

The nun of the folk song was not a second Lioba whose six feet of statuesque beauty could overawe the rudest barbarian of the Thuringian forest. She was a wealthy lady whom the folk pitied because her parents had deprived her of love and subjected her to an existence devoid of all pleasures the common man could understand. To them the convent was an undesirable form of old-age insurance, and a dull monotonous life of staid dignity. All this had no appeal for the carefree, courting lad, Finally the *Klage* was written by youth whose sense of spiritual and material values was limited. Naturally they resented the institutions of the wealthy that discriminated against women of their own class. Of particular interest is the fact that composers of *Klagelieder* were neither those who had lived convent life nor those who would be permitted to take vows.

In both the folk ballads and lyrics the young lady's one desire is for love, that all-consuming interest of the folk. She may be treated lightly, humorously, or condescendingly, but she considers the convent only after all chances of love are exhausted. In the ballad, often the man dies and the girl is forced to enter the convent in order to obtain shelter; there the sad tale ends. In the *Klage* she is a fretful nun in the opening lines, but occa-

sionally instead of remaining a defeated creature doomed to life-long imprisonment, she is transformed into a regenerated bride at the finale.

In the literature of the Middle Ages, even among the folk, men rarely enter the monastery from deprivation of love as they were free to seek another bride. Only the woman's position was so circumscribed as to necessitate a convent if she was not given in marriage at an early date. Therefore, the convents of that day, though they provided an heroic service, would necessarily be as popular with youth as any present-day institution for dependents. Any inmate would be pitied as an unwilling victim of institutional repression.

The earliest *Nonnenmotiv* in German folk poetry is the love of a monk or nobleman for a nun. This theme of forbidden love finds various ramifications in dances and games of the folk, such as the *Nonnenbeichte* in which the confessor desires the affection of the nun, or in their roundelay dances in which the nobleman rescues the heroine from the encirclement formed by the other players. Here and in most early literary works, German and non-German, the popular young lady is still a novice not yet under vow to remain in the convent. Under those circumstances the author enjoys the utmost freedom to transport her to a "happier" state of union with her lover. The folk song never deals with the nun as a religious figure, because its author was not concerned with the convent as a safeguard for the soul. For him the convent served as an aid to the plot in that it represented a threat to the heroine's reunion with her beloved. Such a threat to her happiness could the more easily be dispelled when the girl was still a beginner in the religious life and not under vow to remain.

The *Nonnenklagen* live on into the seventeenth and eighteenth century, surviving the Reformation attempt to transform them into anti-Catholic propaganda and developing into an artificial style that descended more and more to the immoral. Almost no trace of the *Klage* theme survives in modern poetry though folk poems about nuns are not extinct. As recently as the World War a *Nonnenlied* was recorded in Heeger-Wüst's *Volkslieder aus der Pfalz,* but it describes a mother's complaint over the

death of her soldier son. The nun nurse breaks the news to the aged mother.

Hans Helbron asserts that the *Nonnenlieder* tradition was kept alive by the extremely popular ballad *Der Graf und die Nonne*. Its many variations and dialectal versions attest to its widespread influence. It contains the two main elements of the original folksong, *Klosterzwang* and *Abschiedsklage*. More recent versions have named it *Die glückliche Nonne* and allowed the Count to rescue the novice (No. 68, Erk-Böhme).

The nun plays a less colorful part in the *exempla* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These ordinarily point a moral by relating a narrative about a nun involved in an illicit love affair, or a nun who is ridiculously superstitious, or one for whom the Virgin Mary performs a miracle. This latter group contains the famous Beatrice legend which has been treated hundreds of times from the days of Hans Sachs (1499-1576) to Keller's *Legenden* (1872) and Maurice Maeterlinck's *Soeur Béatrice* (1901).

The nun plays almost no part in the epics of Germany nor in the more exalted literature of the scholars of medieval days. Like the folk of Germany, the French and Italian folk include the nun in their literature using the same *Klage* theme. They pity the maiden deprived of the joys of life and subject to the deprivations and discomforts of convent life. England, however, seems not to have such a body of literature. Only *Robin Hood* contains a mention of the nun and in this case she causes the death of an outlaw by her treachery.

II. *Hostility in Lutheran Times*

The sixteenth century saw religious strife and the establishment of the new dogmatic teachings for Lutheran and Calvinist. This century, although distressed by religious rivalry and warfare, had little to say about the nun. Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* makes a slight attempt to ridicule nuns as ignorant, but this is counterbalanced in *Von dem grossen lutherischen Narren* by Thomas Murner's sarcasm against the undue pity wasted by Protestants on nuns. The chapbook *Fortunatus* continues the folk theme in that the heroine leaves the convent as

soon as she regains her beauty and a chance for a happy marriage.

Luther conclusively demonstrates his dislike for religious vows when he leaves his own monastery and encourages Katherine von Bora and her companions to do likewise. He bitterly excoriates those who exalt the nun as more pleasing to God than the married woman. His followers spread his views by circulating Protestant versions of the morality plays. The best example of this indoctrination can be seen in the lengthy poem *Barbali. Ein Gespräch,* in which the daughter not only refuses to go to the convent, but relates all the "evils" of religious life and convinces her family and the clergy of the "wickedness" of convent women.

Of those nuns who withstood the ravages of religious persecution and bewilderment, Charitas Pirckheimer (1456-1532), sister of the well-known humanist, Willibald Pirckheimer (1470-1530), stands out as exceptional. In the midst of religious turmoil and opposition, she maintained her convent in the Catholic faith. Furthermore, she influenced her brother to reject Luther and his followers and return to an active defense of his faith. Her letters to her brother and to Konrad Celtes serve as valuable records of that day and give first-class evidence of the nobility of her character.

The Reformation with its typical sixteenth century addiction to vituperation and invective emphasized the scandals of the convent rather than its utility, though, in general, writers of the sixteenth century pay very little attention to nuns. Not the literary nuns of this period but Martin Luther's comments about them have lived on through the ages. Since the church had control of most medieval institutions, disgraces in their records are now automatically interpreted, not as reproaches against individuals who were in convents for unworthy reasons, but as indicative of the evils existent in the institution in all times.

As the pendulum swings during the man's lifetime, so his tastes fit into the mold of his era and dictate his preferences and abhorrences. Obviously, most writers have not realized that, "To emphasize the identity of church and state in the Middle Ages is, implicitly, to emphasize the change from apostolic Chris-

tianity. No church could have become coextensive with those medieval states without a frightful dilution of its original ideal. We must give all honor to an institution which went down into the arena for us and grappled with that barbarian of untaught nations, and was defiled with that which it daily touched." (G. G. Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion,* p. 57).

III. *The Growth of the Fictional Nun*

Seventeenth century literature scarcely mentions the nun. In fact, for almost a century and a half there is no important nun character in German literature. Phillipp von Zesen (1619-89) mentions in *Die adriatische Rosamunde* (1651) that so lovely a lady as Rosamunde would not enter the convent until all possibilities of marriage had been exhausted. He is merely extending the folk motif as based on the social aspects of woman's position in that day.

In the eighteenth century Protestant philosophy developed into a rationalistic philosophy that attempted to solve man's problems by reason alone. Simultaneously with rationalism there arose a religious movement called pietism, led by Christian Thomasius (1665-1728). The literature of the pietists tended toward the sentimental defense of all unhappy creatures.

It is in the eighteenth century that the monk and the nun play their greatest roles in literature. That period embodies two dissimilar movements, rationalism and sentimentality. Schnabel, Wieland, and the rationalists viewed the monk and the nun with only a tolerant contempt, as creatures violating the laws of reason in their mode of life. However, they and the romanticists after them exalted the hermit. They pictured him as a man of remarkable wisdom and hospitality. His religious affiliation caused no offense as writers could ignore the religion of a man living so utterly removed from society. Through the mouth of the hermit the author frequently imparted his own kindly philosophy of life to other characters, usually travellers.

It was in the latter half of the century that the nun assumed a most important role, in the days of sentimentality. The *Göttinger Hain* and its friends particularly exploited her to arouse the sympathetic feelings of their readers. Johann Heinrich Voss

(1751-1826) succeeds in evoking a melancholy reaction from his readers by poems both favorable and unfavorable toward the nun. He dwells especially on the lonely words of the plaintive novice. There is no relation between Voss' rather belligerent Protestantism and his poems where respect and love, but never bitterness, play a part. In his *Nonnenlieder* he is wholly concerned with pity for an unfortunate girl, quite apart from the religious implications.

Following the popular trend of his period, the gentle Ludwig Christoph Hölty (1748-76) creates a scene of terror in his ballad *Die Nonne* where the nun stabs her former lover and tears out his heart. On the other hand his contemporary, Friedrich Stolberg (1750-1819), gives a dignified Catholic picture of a convent school and the girls who willingly enter the convent. Such were the extremes of the *Göttinger Hain.*

As the sentimental tendency became more widespread, the number of nun characters increased and gradually fitted into one favorite mold, that of the girl who becomes a nun because she is disappointed in love. This notion became so well-established in fiction as to threaten to outmode the *Nonnenklage* tradition that every nun had been a tearful heroine torn from her lover and coerced into a lifetime of suffering and loneliness by cruel parents. The newer conception of a nun's motive and mission was chiefly a fabrication of J. M. Miller (1750-1814), and is one of the most interesting examples of how fiction can build and perpetuate a literary convention which then comes to be accepted as true to life.

In his poetry he kept to the *Nonnenklage* tradition and refers to the novice as an *Opferlamm* whom the parents have cruelly separated from her beloved. So completely popular were these poems as to earn for him acclaim as the *Nonnendichter.*

It is rather in his novels that he fabricates the "disappointed-in-love" heroine. His most significant novel, *Siegwart, eine Klostergeschichte* (1776), was the most important of the many imitations of *Werther* and was in its day considered of equal value. It is important here because in it are incorporated the *Nonnenklage* attitude and the sentimental successor thereof.

It tells the familiar story of the daughter forced into the con-

vent by an unyielding father. Thus Siegwart's ill-fated love for Marianne is thwarted by a father who opposes the marriage. When Siegwart fails to retrieve Marianne, he retires to a monastery where he, too, lives a disconsolate life until destiny reunites them at her death. As a "martyr of love" he dies on her grave.

Siegwart is also loved by a frail, devoted creature, Sophie, who abandons the world because it would be insufferable for her to live without a return of love. As a nun she spends her days drawing tombstones with her name inscribed, blotted out by tears, or writing a love journal for Siegwart in which she refers to herself as his "bride". This is a far cry from the nun stories of medieval days. The *Nonnenlieder* heroine would have found another lover had she but regained her freedom; Miller's women pine away in loving devotion. And both themes thoroughly pleased the readers of their respective periods. Not until the eighteenth century, the time of Miller, do we find an instance where an audience becomes wholly absorbed in a broken-hearted creature who enters a convent because she wishes to flee the world.

So completely did Miller establish the notion that nuns are pitifully lonely creatures wasting away with longing for natural joys that the theme was taken up with only slightly less popular success by Anton Sprickmann (1772-74), Johann Friedrich Albrecht (1752-1814), Joseph Babo (1756-1822), and Veit Weber (1762-1837). The pattern of Miller proved to have an international appeal. Translations of *Siegwart* appeared in French, Polish, Hungarian, Danish, and Dutch. As late as the eighteen-eighties, Dr. Rhijnvis Feith in Holland wrote a novel based on the very same theme.

The most notable of the imitations of *Siegwart* were Friedrich Gotter's (1746-97) *Mariane* and Johann Anton Leisewitz' (1752-1806) *Julius von Tarent* (1776), both dramas. In Gotter's drama Mariane enters the convent willingly at her father's behest, because of her timidity at facing the world (a new motive introduced by Miller), but afterwards she falls in love with a visitor her mother brings. Since the father refuses to permit Mariane to leave the convent she takes poison, but dies happy in the knowledge that she will be reunited with her lover whom her brother has just killed in a duel.

In the Storm and Stress drama of Leisewitz, both the abbess and the lovely novice Blanka live in tragic faithfulness to their lovers. In a scene of great emotional distress, Blanka rejects Julius of Tarent's importunings to leave her "tomb", for she fears the violent reaction on the part of Julius' jealous brother. In spite of the sacrifice of her happiness, Julius is murdered by his brother. The tragic denouement causes Blanka to become insane (popular insanity motif). As usual the convent plays a major role in the plot as the barrier to the consummation of their love. The convent setting affords fruitful opportunities for violent emotional clashes and an approved background for stark tragedy.

The "disappointed-in-love" heroine was then adopted by the writers of the *Trivialroman* as lucrative material. Like the *Werther* imitations, the *Trivialromane* were considered truly great in their day and were treated with the utmost seriousness. Since they were the most popular books of that period, everyone became acquainted with the disappointed-in-love motif from one or the other, and since it was not counteracted by actual contact with real nuns, the fiction became more real than truth itself.

On this foundation, then, the writers of the *Trivialroman* built an elaborate pattern in which the nun is an intriguing and domineering abbess, or a young nun, grief-crazed, until her lover comes to rescue her. The younger nun allowed full play for melodrama, and the abbess had much the character of the villain. Both were highly desirable features in Gothic tales of mystery or gruesome adventure. One character is painted as utterly black, the other as completely white. Crafty priests, limitlessly evil monks, and hardened autocratic nuns created the thrills of these popular works of Vulpius (1762-1827) (Goethe's brother-in-law), Spiess (1755-99), and Veit Weber. Miller began a tradition which they elaborated effectively and to which they often added the happy solution of freedom and marriage for the lovers.

IV. *The Fate of the Fictional Nun in the Hands of the Romanticists*

The era of classicism naturally has few examples of nun characters. The nun can only be fitted into the harmonious totality

of classic simplicity by so great a master as Goethe (1749-1832) himself in his *Die natürliche Tochter* (1804). In this drama the abbess is a character of calm dignity and kindly hospitality. Schiller's (1759-1805) comments on the convent in *Demetrius* and *Die Braut von Messina* (1803) are less significant and merely indicate that according to his views of tragedy, death alone and not a lifetime of penance in a convent can absolve one of guilt.

In much the same spirit of reluctance to consider the convent as a solution for his characters, Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) saves both Nathalie in *Der Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* (1810) and Käthchen in *Käthchen von Heilbronn* (1819) from the life of a nun. Such has always been the attitude of those who are acquainted only with the literary nun.

His contemporary, Zacharias Werner (1768-1823), deems it a glorious release for Katherine von Bora in *Martin Luther* (1807) when she departs from the convent to enjoy the purifying effects of human love. Most critics agree that this play, both in the character of Luther and Katherine, reflects the pathological eroticism of Werner. In his writings after his conversion to Catholicism, he tends to glorify nuns though he does not create any outstanding figure.

Much as religious trends entered into the lives and interests of the writers in the succeding period of romanticism, the nun plays a relatively insignificant role among the romantics with the possible exception of Clemens Brentano (1778-1842). The latter uses the Beatrice legend and joins with it many conventional motifs of incest and regeneration through love. The three daughters in the *Romanzen vom Rosenkranz* (1803-11), after overcoming their temptations and trials, become nuns, thus symbolizing the success of the forces of spirituality over the forces of sensuality. The nun is used here as a symbolic figure only, not as epitomizing Catholic perfection, because this was written before Brentano's return to active Catholicism.

Brentano lavished his greatest praise on nuns after his conversion to Catholicism. Then he wrote *Die barmherzigen Schwestern* (1831), an account of the works of charity of the Sisters of Charity. Still later he became so impressed by the visionary nun Anna Katharina Emmerich that he recorded her

revelations in his book *Das bittere Leiden unsers Herrn Jesu Christi* (1833). It is not difficult to trace the transition in his attitude toward nuns through studying his writings in chronological order. These latter works, strictly speaking, are not literary works.

For the most part the other romantics merely reflect the attitude of Miller and the *Trivialroman.* Even the Catholic poet Eichendorff (1788-1857) in his *Novelles* or his poem *Die Nonne und der Ritter* can hardly be said to make an original contribution to the romantic school. However, his *Nonnenklage* is elevated in tone, charming in its *Wechsel* form, and wholly in accord with the church's attitude of respect. The monk plays a considerable part in the writings of the Protestant romantics, either because he epitomizes the perfect lover of art in the fashion of Wackenroder (1773-98), or as with Novalis (1772-1801) he stands surrounded by the mystical glory of romantic metaphysics.

Tieck (1773-1853) and de la Motte-Fouqué (1777-1843) use the nun primarily for purposes of atmosphere. She lends a mysterious element of awe to the latter's weird story in *Sintram* (1814) and an attractive love element similar to the *Trivial* treatment in Tieck's *Franz Sternbald* (1798). Arnim (1781-1831) employs most of the previous motifs in his attempt to create an historical picture of the Middle Ages in *Die Kronenwächter* (1805-08). Here are mingled the tales of morbid sensuality, of overbearing abbesses, and of well-intentioned novices.

The poems of Uhland (1787-1862) and Kerner (1786-1862) imitate, for the most part, the *Klage* themes of the folk poems. E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) alone expresses what might be considered personal comments of a disparaging nature. He is apt to employ the convent as a refuge for disagreeable characters or to ridicule them in chance comments for their lack of a sane enjoyment of life. He varies between scornful pity for them and pained bewilderment at their years of abnegation. It may be said in general that the romanticists kept the nun at a respectful distance, merely referring to her as an ideal of spiritual beauty, as a mere prototype of the previous love-sick model, or in the case of Arnim and Hoffmann, as creatures of illogical extremes.

V. *The Agnostic Days of Realism*

In the days following romanticism the nun played a minor role primarily because Young Germany exalted the emancipation of the flesh. Though the *Nonnenklage* theme lives on in poems of Emanuel Geibel (1815-84) and Hieronymus Lorm (1821-92), there is otherwise a new trend quite removed from that found in the days of romanticism. Heine (1797-1856), Gutzkow (1811-78), and the writers of historical novels Dahn (1834-1912) and Taylor (1837-1909) see nothing to admire in a life of self-repression. Therefore the nun must be ignored or treated contemptuously. They suspect her even of base emotions, as one who clamors for sensual experiences.

Only Taylor is notably influenced by political prejudice. In *Klytia* (1883) he definitely reflects the hostile attitude of the Bismarck regime to the Jesuits and to any aspect of the Catholic church which might seem to have political implications. This post-Reformation story is offset by Wilhelm Meinhold's (1797-1851) *Sidonia von Borck, die Klosterhexe* (1847) which has a similar time setting, but none of the anti-Jesuit spirit. In this case, the pure adventure of retelling a supposed chronicle absorbs the author. The nuns play an important role mostly as contrasts to the wicked Sidonia, whose scandalous conduct both before and after becoming a nun form an adventurous tale of terror.

To understand the writings of Paul Heyse (1830-1914), Gottfried Keller (1819-90), and C. F. Meyer (1825-98), it is necessary to remember that the days of realism are likewise days of agnosticism, if not downright disbelief in matters of religious faith. Higher criticism, as expounded by Feuerbach (1804-72), Strauss (1808-74) and Renan (1823-92), did much to shake the foundations of orthodox belief. Realists, with the exception of Heine who represents a transition from romanticism to realism, omit the vulgar in their treatment of the nun, but they take an especial interest in the psychological reaction of the nun's personality to convent discipline. Paul Heyse reserves the convent for those to whom the world refuses its pleasures. He treats them only rarely but naturally shows no genuine reverence for them. Poetic realism has only an aesthetic appreciation and so Heyse uses convents or nuns in whatever way best serves his

literary objective. Perhaps he would not have resorted to using the nun at all except that she lends atmosphere to his Italian settings.

C. F. Meyer, too, finds the nun a deplorable creature in his pictures of renaissance days, particularly in *Plautus im Nonnenkloster* (1883). There he presents an unscrupulous, hypocritical abbess, surrounded by ignorant, superstitious nuns. These nuns either live comfortable, purposeless lives or dissatisfied, complaining lives. Here is definitely mirrored Meyer's contempt for medieval church practices and his distaste for all that savors of penitential practice and what seems to him malicious neuroticism.

This same distaste for religious "fanaticism" is found in Gottfried Keller. He uses medieval legends merely to shape them to new molds of thought. When he presents the Beatrice legend he clearly demonstrates that Beatrice performed her greatest act for God when she married and bore children. Only in motherhood did she reach her full stature. Firmly convinced that public service to mankind is the true essence of piety he transformed his religious characters from faded visionaries of future joys to attractive, practical doers of present duties.

Frau Marlitt (1825-87) and Felix Dahn (1834-1912), two of the most popular writers of the late nineteen hundreds were read almost as much by their contemporaries as Miller was in his day. Both of these widely read writers are affected by a cynical distrust of the motives of religious women. Georg Ebers (1837-98), writer of antiquarian novels, however, seems to have avoided such religious scepticism as permeates the writings of his fellow historical novelists. He is even kindlier than Karl Gutzkow (1811-78) who, though he favored many aspects of Catholicism in *Der Zauberer von Rom* (1858-61), still could not accept the idea of monasticism in its fullest sense. In general, the agnostic trend evidences itself in the attitude of suspicion which realistic writers show for any idealistic institution. In particular, such writers feel it advisable to rescue any nun character from the convent lest she become utterly drab and spiritless or a scheming potentate.

As one approaches naturalism and the twentieth century, one

finds a kindly attitude toward convents in a work by Theodor Fontane (1819-98). Apparently Fontane forms a bridge that proceeds from realism into the new era. It is not so strange, therefore, that he lacks the scepticism of his predecessors, but it is most surprising that he should be as kindly disposed as he actually appears in his one famous *Novelle*. In *Grete Minde* the Sisters of Arendsee play a prominent part in that they are kind to the unhappy Grete at a time when all the rest of the Christian world has nothing to offer her. They grant burial to the actor Valtin, her husband, who was refused Christian burial by the Lutheran minister. These Sisters whom Fontane creates are not only dignified noblewomen but at the same time warmly human and genuinely cultured.

Since many important writers of this and the following centuries were Catholics, the question arises as to their attitude. The Catholic attitude is more favorable, as might be expected, regardless of century or mood. One cannot, of course, speak of Catholic attitudes as opposed to Protestant attitudes until the Reformation. One finds no mention of nuns in Grillparzer (1791-1872), Stifter (1805-1868), or Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797-1848), outstanding Catholic writers though they are. Joseph Viktor von Scheffel (1826-86) and Friedrich Wilhelm Weber (1813-94) offer two portrayals of nuns but both instances are in accord with the whole tone of their works, in the direction of the humorous and whimsical. Certain second-rate, but widely read Catholic women writers, like Antonie Jüngst (1843-1918) and Emmy Giehrl (1837-1915) have tended to accentuate the sentimental elements of the convent, but that is not the prime element in the Catholic literary portrayal of the nun.

The Catholic literary revival of the twentieth century is found in all European countries. It shows a tendency toward conservativism in employing the nun as a character. In France, Catholics such as Jacques Maritain, Paul Claudel, and Henri Ghéon have not written about the nun in works of fiction. In England, too, it was not the brilliant G. K. Chesterton who treated the nun, but secondary literary writers, frequently converts to Catholicism.

The case is slightly different in Germany. It was not until the twentieth century that the number of outstanding Catholic writ-

ers there stood in fair proportion to the number of German Catholics. Among recent important works of fiction in Germany there are fuller treatments of the nun, especially in the novels of Enrica von Handel-Mazzetti (1871-) and Hans Carossa (1878-). The former has a trilogy of books, *Die Waxenbergerin* (1934), *Graf Reichard* (1938), and *Im stillen Linz* (1940), where the convent in the time of Napoleon and thereafter constitutes the chief setting. Hans Carossa presents the human and natural qualities of nuns in his sympathetic scenes throughout the book *Der Arzt Gion* (1932). The convert Gertrud von Le Fort (1876-) has exhibited a zealous enthusiasm for the heroism of nuns in her book *Das Letzte am Schafott* (1933). Here the most timid of the nuns receives sufficient grace from God to ascend the steps to the guillotine along with her fifteen Carmelite companions who likewise become martyrs of the French Revolution.

The writers just mentioned, with the exception of Carossa, actually precede the Catholic literary revival but may be considered a part of the upbeat of the religious revival. Even in Germany, there is a striking uniformity among the majority of Catholic writers in regard to the nun as a character. They refrain from producing works in which an individual nun plays a leading role. This is probably due to the fact that the ordinary Catholic would feel restrained from treating the nun as a literary character on account of his feeling of respect or even awe. It is for this reason that the Catholic group has been treated as one unit and the strict chronology of the study in this case has been disregarded. Now we return to an earlier period of non-Catholic writers.

VI. *Recent Trends*

Modern industrialism and materialism not only changed the lives of the workingmen but the tastes and style of literature. Realism was followed by the naturalistic school which attempted to give photographic reproductions of exterior reality. Naturalistic writers became engrossed with the misfortunes of life, especially with tragedies that resulted from heredity and environment. They depicted the most sordid and helpless creatures in a setting designed to promote their downfall. Naturally such a period has almost no nun literature.

With the advent of the Freudian influence in literature, sensual themes play a larger role than ever before. Writers desire to probe the motives and feelings of those practicing virginity with the assurance that abnormalities of a very odious nature will be discovered. A precedent for this type of literature had been set up long before Freud by Heinrich Heine, whose utter lack of reverence allowed him full play for his lascivious and suggestive inferences. Later writers of the period from 1915-25 not only imitated this but tended to create nun characters in whom heavenly and earthly love often merged into an abnormal mixture of passion. Alfred Döblin (1878-) wrote a play *Die Nonne von Kemnade* (1923) in which the leading character, the Abbess Judith, plays the role of a degenerate nun in a controversial era. Döblin condones her behavior on the basis of the fact that human nature could not be placed under so severe a restraint.

The narrative of the same Judith treated by Döblin is carried to even greater extremes in the poem *Judith von Kemnade* by Lulu von Strauss und Torney (1873-), one of the finest of Germany's recent poets. In another poem, *Die Nonne,* the same author emphasizes woman's need for motherhood. Not only does the aged nun of the poem confuse divine and earthly love, but she envies the younger nuns their warmth and vibrancy. The same glorification of the claims of the flesh is continued in the poems of Börries von Münchhausen (1874-) and in the lesser literary writers Otto Julius Bierbaum (1865-1910), Max Bruns (1876-), and Max Hermann (1896-).

Both in her poetry and prose the neo-romantic Ricarda Huch (1864-) presents the nun only as a lustful a-religious creature, proud of her physical powers. Emil Strauss' (1866-) heroine in *Schwester Euphemia* (1910) is likewise obsessed with passion, an unnatural passion for her brother. Her only hope of conquering it lies in her withdrawal to a convent, but she dies a victim of her unhappy abnormal affection as well as of her complete disillusionment about spiritual regeneration. Decidedly similar is the underlying atmosphere in Rudolf Binding's (1867-1938) novelette *Angelucia* (1911). All the details surrounding the life of Angelucia and her motive for becoming a nun assure the reader of the girl's completely abnormal sexual life and her need of the

material practicalities of this world. Wilhelm von Scholz (1874-) pictures in his story *Perpetua* (1926) a contract between two sisters, a witch and a nun, but both veering toward the abnormal.

Of the triad of outstanding novelists of modern Germany (Thomas Mann, Kolbenheyer, Stehr), Kolbenheyer (1878-) is the one who has paid most attention to the nun. While Stehr may truly be termed a *Gottsucher,* Kolbenheyer feels himself destined to lead Germany back to the metaphysical approach to life. In his novel, *Das gottgelobte Herz* (1938) he gives a penetrating personal interpretation of the life story of Margarete Ebner, the thirteenth century mystic. He conceives her as a true German character who cannot be satisfied with Roman Catholic and therefore foreign mysticism, because she longs for a living experience of God's love. When He does not come to solemnize their heavenly marriage, her mind and heart turn to the longing for mother-love. Kolbenheyer's thesis is that as a married woman, Margarete Ebner could have lived a more wholesome life and could at the same time have enjoyed a richer, more typically Germanic spirituality.

It was more or less natural that at the time of the World War the nun should appear as a nurse in post-war novels. In this new field, the author usually views her favorably, as a dispenser of health to mankind. With the same kindness as Hans Carossa in *Der Artz Gion,* Max Kretzer (1854-) praises a nun in *Schwester Maria* and Wilhelm von Scholz pictures her sympathetically in *Das Glück des Sterbenden* (1915). On the other hand, the expressionist Georg Kaiser (1878-) has presented in *Rosamunde Floris* (1940) a nun having none of those admirable qualities nor any of the exalted tendencies found in expressionism. She resembles more nearly the Siegwartian nun in that she enters the convent because her fiancé married another, and now she wishes to die in missionary service because she can never be happy without him.

The folk depictions of nuns are continued simultaneously in the poems of two such dissimilar poets as Hermann Löns (1866-1914) and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). They are fundamentally *Nonnenklagen,* yet they transcend all classes and periods in that they use figurative language to express in generalizations the bewilderment of humanity in its groping for a sense

of values. Both are studies in contrasts; a pale, protected life is weighed against a colorful but more precarious existence.

The conventional method of using the nun to embellish an historical setting appears in almost every period. Recent literature includes such plays as Gerhart Hauptmann's (1862-) *Kaiser Karls Geisel* (1908), and the less well-known plays *Thomas Münzer* (1921) by Paul Gurk (1880-) and *Kaiserin Irene* (1921) by Otto Flake (1882-).

Shortly before the World War men began to tire of naturalism and to veer away from sordid themes. The new spirit was fanned into flame by the political, social, and religious circumstances after the war so that there emerged among artists and literary men a school of thought whose members referred to themselves as expressionists. It reached its peak between the years 1920 and 1925. In almost all its tenets it showed itself a vigorous opponent of all that the impressionistic and naturalistic schools stood for.

Instead of scientific accounts verging on the photographic, expressionists deal with types; in place of a bitter struggle for existence in a degenerate world, one finds an optimistic hope for happiness in a mutual feeling of brotherly love; the previous superficial striving for selfish human pleasures gives place to a longing for the transcendental and the vast beauty of the supernatural realm. Even though the school of expressionism is today dead, much of what its followers believed lives on. Since Franz Werfel (1890-) began as an expressionist, his book *Das Lied von Bernadette* (1941) reflects the spirit of that school. It is the life story of the nun-Saint, Bernadette of Lourdes, who epitomizes man's longing for divine values. It is significant that interest in the supernatural was sufficiently widespread to make *Das Lied von Bernadette* a best seller very much in the same way that *Der arme Heinrich* captivated a large reading public in the Middle Ages.

VII. *The Nun in non-German Literature*

The attitude toward the nun throughout the successive periods of literary history finds a striking parallel in the literature of other European countries. France most nearly coincides with

Germany when one surveys the shifting evaluation of the nun. Italy has much in common with France and Germany, but instances of the nun in Italian literature are far more rare. English literature shows quite the same attitudes but not sufficiently concentrated into one period as to be a reflection of the European trend at a given time. Chaucer's Prioress in the *Canterbury Tales* is the most famous nun in the literature of England.

Though Dante (1265-1321) and Shakespeare (1564-1616) spoke of nuns with respect and even kindly pity, they mentioned her only very rarely, whereas Christopher Marlowe (1564-93), Dryden (1631-1700), and Mrs. Aphra Behn (1640-89) gave their nuns much more important roles as victims in plots of intrigue. in France Diderot's *La Religieuse* (1760) and LaHarpe's *Mélanie* (1767) enjoyed the same popularity with the great mass of readers that *Siegwart* did in Germany. Lewis' *The Monk* (1795), written in England was even more similar to the German *Trivialroman* than the great Italian novel by Alessandro Manzoni, *I Promessi Sposi* (1840).

More recent times have witnessed an interest in the nun as a creature adaptable to a love story somewhat in the manner of *Die glückliche Nonne* of the folksong. *L'Isolée* (1905 by Bazin finds its counterpart in the American Catholic novel *The White Sister* (1909) by F. Marion Crawford. Until Crawford's time the nun played almost no part in American literature with the exception of poetic mention in the writings of Longfellow (1807-82) and Whittier (1807-92). Recent times have brought forth many instances of the nun in popular or semi-popular novels both in England and America. Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* (1936) was the most significant contribution, but less important instances occur in the novels of second rate writers such as Mary Ellen Chase (1887-), Fanny Hurst (1889-), E. Delafield (1890-1943), and A. J. Cronin (1896-). Interest was manifested by American play-goers who thronged the theatre to see Max Reinhardt's production of *The Miracle,* and to a lesser degree when the plays of the Spaniard Gregorio Martinez-Sierra were put on the American stage in their translated version, *The Cradle Song* (1911) and the *The Kingdom of God* (1915).

The legend material regarding the nun retains a more consistent and identical popularity in international literature than any other. Legends are a literary genre in their own right and

are strangely similar from country to country. The appeal of certain nun legends never fades, nor does any generation ever exhaust all their material possibilities. Those motifs that occur most frequently in world literature are:

1) The legend of the nun who sacrificed her eye-sight to retain her chastity has been surpassed in popularity, but never cast into oblivion.

2) The Beatrice legend derives is popularity in part from the fact that the nun here perfectly satisfies any reader because she has the supreme privilege of enjoying both material and spiritual pleasures, of combining in herself the most attractive human qualities while retaining an appealing love of the Blessed Virgin.

3) The King Arthur legend, known as it is in all lands, includes the story of the repentant Guinevere who atones for her sins by ending her days so devoutly in the Almesbury convent that she is rewarded by the position of abbess.

4) The Abelard and Héloise love story that is not, strictly speaking, a legend but has taken on legendary proportions. It appeals to the same type of audience as the *Siegwart story*, for here again is a nun languishing pitifully in her cell because she cannot marry her lover Abelard.

VIII. *Conclusion*

The most significant conclusion to all this summary of literary history is that Germany has included nuns in her fiction to a larger extent even than some other countries and in a greater variety of roles. Of the authors who have included nun characters in their writings, the majority are men, non-Catholic men. The women whose works have been included here are predominantly Catholic and they are far more sympathetic toward nuns.

The present study has also made clear that nuns do not play as important a role in literature as monks. Nuns were less known. In the Middle Ages respect for women was closely allied to love of God and hence was not to be lightly treated by

refined writers. In the days succeeding the age of chivalry, when monks were apt to be public figures subject to flagrant political scandals, the nuns in their retirement avoided the displeasure and jealousy of the material world.

The logical result was that the average person formed his opinions of nuns solely from the picture given in fiction, since factual books about nuns would rarely have a wide reading public. As a rule literary men gained their knowledge from preceding authors and so the fictional creature becomes a literary tradition quite remote from her counterpart in reality. Thus we have an interesting example of the influence of literature on life, in all the major European literatures.

Nuns have definitely assumed a place in the history of education in Germany. Among the many early scholarly nuns and mystics, Roswitha predominates for her contribution to German literature. In the history of the folk song the nun plays a leading role in the genre known as the *Nonnenklage* wherein the novice bemoans her loss of springtime and love. The motif of the *Nonnenklage* has never died out but was partially superseded by a new motif devised by Johann Martin Miller in his novel *Siegwart.* His age of sentimentality was captivated by his portrayal of the nun who enters the convent because she is disappointed in love. Subsequent writers continue to create equally weak heroines pining away their lonely lives in a convent cell. Such disappointed-in-love examples continue even among the romanticists though they use nun characters rarely. Brentano has given considerable attention to the nun but for the most part in non-fiction works.

Among the realists the chief interest in the nun was centered on the psychological reaction of a person subjected to convent discipline. Freudian writers again employed the nun frequently, this time in order to examine her penitential life for abnormalities. Not until the recent return of transcendental themes has she been treated with kindly interest. Such has been primarily the shifting attitude toward the nun in the literature of every European country.

The attitude toward the nun, based as it was on the facts of medieval life and the fiction of sentimental authors, would neces-

sarily be fairly consistent in each country, partly because such a motif cannot escape the interaction of comparative literary trends, partly because love is a theme so universally pursued by the world that no phase of human endeavor has not been joined to a love plot to furnish variety. Moreover, the ordinary person is usually incapable of comprehending voluntary chastity for any normal woman and in his inability to understand her religious motive he seizes upon the one motive he could best explain: She hides from the world because there will be no love for her there anyway. Then if she remains a nun because no hero came to rescue her, she should, according to the psychology of fiction writers, become hardened and domineering, sublimating her suppressed love life by a vicious love for power, or she will pine away like the Siegwartian disappointed-in-love heroine. The only other excuse for remaining would be that she is constrained to flee the world because of some abnormal zest for penance.

Throughout literary history the nun in fiction has furnished material which the author found valuable for one of several possible reasons:

1) She was alvantageous for her picturesque qualities in an historical panorama of the Middle Ages.

2) She furnished an element of mystery because of her adherence to the supernatural.

3) A harsh, ambitious abbess supplied a foil to the heroine.

4) The young novice became so attractive a victim, so helpless in her misery as to win the hearts and tears of a vast audience.

Naturally, the future of the nun in literature is uncertain, but one can assume that she will continue to appear in literature as long as she continues in life. Her future appearance will undoubtedly be new variations on former themes, perhaps verging a bit closer to the actual circumstances of her life as her numbers increase and she becomes better known in her activities of service.

VITA

Sister Mary Gretchen Hessler was born February 9, 1911, in Villa Grove, Illinois. After graduating at University High School in Urbana, Illinois, in 1928, she entered the University of Illinois, from which she was graduated in 1931. The following year she entered the novitiate of the Sisters of St. Dominic, Sinsinawa, Wisconsin. She taught for ten years at Visitation High School in Chicago. During those years she spent several summers studying at the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois. She acquired her M.A. degree at the University of Illinois in 1941. After a year's leave of absence to continue her work for the doctorate at the University of Illinois, she became a member of the faculty of Rosary College, River Forest, Illinois.